

Exit Interview with Roberta Adams, Staff Assistant Presidential Personnel Office

Interviewer: David Alsobrook, Presidential Papers Staff

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Transcriber: Winnie Hoover

Alsobrook: First of all, Roberta, when did you first come to work in the White House?

Adams: It was September of '77.

Alsobrook: Do you remember the first day you were here, and what it was like?

Adams: Oh yes! [Laughs]

Alsobrook: What do you recall about it?

Adams: I was frightened. I had no idea what to expect. I had a general idea what the job was going to be, but the job had just been upgraded. So, the expectations were wide open, I guess. So, it was for me to be able to create it, but I didn't have an understanding of the office. The office was so busy and so inundated with work, nobody really had the time to explain it to me. I mean, it was still in a state of real renovation on the staff so it was a matter of just floating loose for awhile until things could settle down, and just fitting in wherever I could. Pitching in when anybody needed help.

Alsobrook: Was Jim King still head of that office?

Adams: Yes, Jim King was there for a month or six weeks, something like that, and he left the end of October. So he was there about a month, and then Jim Bennett took over.

Alsobrook: Who hired you for the job?

Adams: Peggy Rainwater.

Alsobrook: Did you come to the White House for an interview?

Adams: Yes. I interviewed with her, with Jim – Jim King and Jim Bennett both. And then Kathy O'Neill at that time was – of course I guess their office manager, and she was trying to help Peggy recruit candidates for that job. And I had known Kathy a long time, and she had thought that I was qualified for the job and called me. And I was living in Philadelphia, and she suggested that I come try for it.

Alsobrook: So how did they describe the job to you, before you came to work here? What type of job did they offer?

Adams: At that time it was called the “Confidential Assistant,” so there were a lot of management duties, administrative duties that were to be expected of me, along with clerical work. So it was a combination. And, of course, it was open. It was a matter of if I could handle the clerical and keep it minimal, then, I could then take on greater duties in the office, and it was in such a stage then with the amount of work and few people to do it that it would have been wide open to anybody who had offered to help. So, there was a lot of potential there.

Alsobrook: When you say “confidential assistant,” were you like an assistant to all the heads of the office, or to one person?

Adams: To Peggy. It’s designed – the setup at that time was designed like a team – we referred to them as clusters – the associate director would head up the cluster and then each associate director would then report to the director.

Alsobrook: And that is the way it was when you first came in?

Adams: That’s the way it was then, yeah.

Alsobrook: When you first came in, okay. There you go. I think what I was going to ask you next about it was how did duties change during the time that you have been in Presidential Personnel? You described what you were doing when you first went in there.

Adams: Somewhat. I’m trying to think now. They chose to put me on the [inaudible] to the office based on [inaudible] because I had a lot of people come in either on a consulting basis or detail for a short time, whatever the different programs are, they do that. So, there were more and more people in the office trying to take care of, rather than just Peggy. It started out it was just Peggy and I, and then it was Peggy and Greg and I...

Alsobrook: Molina, right?

Adams: Greg Molina. Two years. And then there was a third little office in the suite of offices where we are located, and that has usually been loaned out to these consultants coming in and on and off the staff. So it has been taking care of them trying to train them, show them around, how to handle that, and that was the one other aspect. Now there are three people, plus interns. We started the intern program, so it is a matter of keeping everybody organized and training the interns. So more and more of my duties have evolved towards administrative and clerical, and away from the actual appointment, but I am still handling three or four commissions, and if there are vacancies coming up, then I deal with them, but I don’t take on any more, because of the greater need for clerical help.

Alsobrook: But when you first came to the White House, were you working on all types of commissions and regulatory boards and various kinds of departments like they were trying to staff like [inaudible].

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Adams: No. Well, all of us helped out in one aspect or the other, but I was never in the decision-making aspect of it for full-time regulatory positions. The decision-making aspect – most of them were advisory boards.

Alsobrook: For example, what kinds of boards are you talking about?

Adams: Some of them have the same duties as the advisory boards for the President that the President appoints versus Cabinet member appointments. So I've done the searching and the screening, the selection process for the President, and that's been my primary function. As far as searching for Cabinet positions, we all got together last summer, due to the turnover in Cabinet members, to go over all the names and resumes that we had, to see what would be good ideas for new Cabinet members. Even the people who had submitted their resumes for advisory boards or consulting, we thought possibly that if they submitted it would be worth a try to ask them if they would be willing to consider one of these positions. So, we had done a heavy search process and that was the one time when I had really been involved in searching for positions.

Alsobrook: Was that one of the busiest times in the office over the last summer? Do you remember that?

Adams: As far as the other [inaudible] the realization when I first came in '77 and in '78 it became more of a routine and I was able to cut out a lot of the extra duties and to smooth out the office routine. At first I set up a lot of systems for that office, which cut out a lot of wasted time. As far as an unusual assignment, that was— very time-consuming, and very exciting.

Alsobrook: How so?

Adams: It was such a thrill for all of us to be able to pull together as one huge family and help the President with the candidates. We never had a dull moment. Either we worked weekends... some of us, if we weren't in the office, we were on the phone to the office. And it was a tremendous experience, it really was. I was so happy to be able to do that.

Alsobrook: So as you mentioned this was probably the only time when you would have dealt with the various stages in the selection of a particular appointment, right?

Adams: Certainly. [Inaudible]

Alsobrook: Without naming names of candidates or whatever, could you take one of those positions that entered a cabinet position and name the various stages that you go through, in terms of background check and what-have-you, and all the input that various people would have,

Alsobrook: [continued] before the final selection was made?

Adams: Well, since I haven't done – I've only done advisory boards – not the appointments. And my selection process would be different, and I could tell you the whole process...

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Alsobrook: Could you do that?

Adams: That's what I have done for two and a half years.

Alsobrook: Yeah, do that. I'd like that, then.

Adams: Everybody else in the office could tell you about the appointments. The Advisory Board –I'm trying to think – as far as the hardest one is one that would be more recruited. I guess one of the most challenging lately has been the National Council on the Handicapped. That was created by legislation in '78, November of '78, for fifteen members determined by the President and confirmed by the Senate.

And the Council is affiliated with HEW [Department of Health, Education, and Welfare]—HEW does [inaudible] screenings. So full lists of candidates and recommendations for candidates, we referred them all to HEW. Those posted notices that are registered as the opening [inaudible] so they're getting hundreds of names – I think they had over 300 names. They had the Policy and Program people screaming. Earlier, of course, because of all the emotional and political interest that has come about because of this new legislation, so we're getting calls constantly from interest groups to members of Congress, newspapers, and domestic policy people. You know, the entire gamut.

This went on for a year. The other 300 candidates that were screened at HEW—we try to make sure that all of the different interest groups that [inaudible] are represented. But when we select the fifteen people that will represent the largest and broadest scope of representation, as far as the handicapped community is concerned, we are talking about mental rehabilitation, paraplegics, death, any and all categories need to be represented there.

So the policy people screen out the...Policy and Program people...the issues. Then it goes on up the line...

Alsobrook: Stu Eizenstat's staff – is that what you are talking about?

Adams: No, I am talking about Policy people at HEW.

Alsobrook: OK, I gotcha.

Adams: They would make a huge matrix of all the different types of candidates and who will

Adams: [continued] represent the largest constituencies, geographic spreads, and what their interests are. These fritter down to a working group of about thirty and then, from there, all the way up the line to the secretary, it's frittered down to fifteen. And all this time, they are in touch with us, about how the breakdown is coming, and we're also letting them know where the political pressures are. The members of the Senate who are involved with the subcommittee that had concerned them are sending candidates over to us and to HEW and [inaudible]. At the same

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time, about six to nine months later we're getting complaints that have been encountered that have built up more and more pressure. Then, the final comes through the Secretary to the White House, and then again it's looked over. And we essentially have worked on the policy aspect of it. From here on out, they're checking out the political aspects of the geographic and ethnic representations. All this has to fit into the matrix. Also the national [inaudible] are recognized leaders of the handicapped community are really still fighting to promote their position.

Alsobrook: Among the various groups you mean?

Adams: Among the various groups, and amongst each other, trying to ensure that they are represented and other groups aren't. And this comes—I guess it's typical—that the issue, like the handicapped issue now recognized by the President is really quite an emotional, very volatile type of issue. So they're trying to work on that, and getting a lot of pressure from all angles.

Alsobrook: Roberta, as you selected...

Adams: It comes through. They are seeking the ear of the President [inaudible]

Alsobrook: ...fifteen names?

Adams: The fifteen names.

Alsobrook: Now, in terms of trying to decide who you want on this advisory board, do you often depend on people out in the various parts of the country to give you good advice on these people? Do you just call them on the phone and talk with them about who these people are, and so on?

Adams: You can't get much. We rely mainly on Washington people. The people that deal with the databases at HEW, and Stu Eizenstat's people, and ultimately we start not working with people in the states because the wider the circle of checks, the more likelihood of the confidentiality being lost. And that's really a main concern, is making sure that all this remains confidential.

Alsobrook: How do you end up doing that?

Adams: Well, it's really [inaudible] What we do with the sources that [inaudible] although people do go to the press. People don't understand the process, so they all look at somebody who is being looked at, they will go to the press. It's exciting. You can't wait to tell something that is exciting, to tell the world. It's really not negative, but it's people just wanting...

Alsobrook: It's not like they are leaking something?

Adams: No. Some of them can't wait for it to happen, and to see movement from the White House. It's just a tremendous gesture.

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Alsobrook: I want to ask you about the President's involvement in the various parts of the process of selecting people. This is strictly an opinion question. Does he get involved in the process directly?

Adams: No, generally he doesn't. He has relied on the— like Jack Watson said, he has relied on us about 90 to 95% of the time. There are candidates, or there are counselors that Congressional members have mentioned to him that they would like to [inaudible] their constituents to be considering, and he would send us a note letting us know that. But he's not on the phone with us, [inaudible]. He relies on us to do all of that, and then, usually he approves whatever he [inaudible]. There would be comments but as Jack Watson said, he respects our judgment and our ability to be able to do that, and really has given us the responsibility to work with him. So, what we do reflects on the President. So with that in mind, we have that pressure to perform well.

Alsobrook: You know, there's been a lot of publicity about this President's interest in minority and women appointments.

Adams: Absolutely.

Alsobrook: Have you seen a lot of interest in that?

Adams: Absolutely, yeah. There is no way we could send an advisory board to the President of all white males from the East Coast. That wouldn't be approved.

Alsobrook: [inaudible]

Adams: Yeah. Absolutely!

Alsobrook: Normally, Roberta, like you have said, there is one person that would be appointed to a particular position—or two. How many names would you send him?

Adams: Normally, we would send him just that name. Every once in a while, though it's been rare, we would send him an alternate.

Alsobrook: This goes straight to him, or does it go through anybody else's office?

Adams: It comes – when we pull it together for a final selection, we have been working back and forth. For instance, by the time we are ready to draw the memo or write the memo to [inaudible name], who is now the press director of the office, then finally submit the memo to him, and then he sends it to Jack. And if it's a Presidential appointment with Senate confirmation, it goes directly to the President, and if it requires only some handshake or just a presidential appointment without Senate confirmation, it goes to Hamilton. Hamilton then looks at it and determines the final [inaudible] and whether the President should see it.

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Alsobrook: Now, Ken Craft used to be involved in that...

Adams: Yeah and that's what Ken did, to try to relieve the workload for the President.

Alsobrook: And then, after the President...

Adams: Comes back.

Alsobrook: Comes back to you?

Adams: Comes back to us. We then do the security checks and the Congressional checks and if they all pan out, which they do ninety-nine percent of the time. We send it back to the President, saying that these people have been approved and cleared for appointment, and the commissions have been drawn up. There are checks and balances all along the way, and a lot of people involved in the process.

Alsobrook: And Jack Watson does get involved...

Adams: Also, our office is the coordinating point for all the decision making.

Alsobrook: You mentioned Jack at one point in the memo from Arnie...

Adams: Jack Watson. Yeah, we report to Jack, where we used to report to Tim. And then, when Tim left, we reported directly to Hamilton. And since a lot of this is all through the government affairs, it's the most logical evolution, I guess, of the positions, is that we report to Jack Watson.

Alsobrook: Roberta, what has been the most challenging aspect of working in presidential personnel?

Adams: Uh. Geez, I can't pick what was *the* most challenging. One thing that was very difficult—counseling and the search process. One committee that I have been doing is the focus committee on the employment of the handicapped. We start the research process long before the national council got involved. It defines people that we thought were qualified to be the national vice-chair, and also keep in mind the geographic, staff ethnic representation and to get a national leader is really difficult to do. And then when you finally get it all in place, one of the candidates may withdraw, so it could fall apart at any stage. And to finally have it all happen and to get appointed, it's such a thrill to see the whole picture fall into place. That happened with another council that I had. It took me over a year to complete a search – an environmental council.

Alsobrook: And at the end something happened?

Adams: And at the end, it's like I said, that's when the guy with the candidacy withdrew. You never know what's going to happen.

Alsobrook: What if the FBI checks out after the President has approved somebody. The [inaudible] has the FBI check some type of [inaudible] background.

Adams: You either have to withdraw, or we'd have to determine what the problem is first – see how critical it is.

Alsobrook: Now, “conflict of interest” checks, and those regarding his finances. Would they...

Adams: Like Senate confirmation positions, yeah.

Alsobrook: Would they be done by the counselor's office?

Adams: Yeah.

Alsobrook: And this of course would be done long before you send them to the President, right?

Adams: No, the slate is sent in for approval, and then, when they've been approved, then they send out those packages to the candidates, and it goes first to the FBI for investigation on the conflict of interest.

Alsobrook: And the counselor would get involved then?

Adams: The counsel would review the financial aspects of the candidate's background, but if there isn't a counselor, then I would get in touch with the candidate to see whether or not he either would resign from the board, or put a stock in trust, whatever it is, to avoid the conflict. You either eliminate the conflict, or a candidate would have to withdraw and can't be considered. So you can't nominate 'em, 'cause even though it is the President [inaudible] the office, the counsel's office certifies these candidates, that they are capable to take the nomination. Then, the Senate turns around and does the same thing—interrogates them. They have a series of questions that they ask the candidates, as far as their qualifications and ability to serve.

Alsobrook: Okay.

Adams: What's so strange, I guess, about these presidential appointments is that anybody outside of Washington probably figures or assumes that all you have to do is wave a magic wand and you're a candidate! And it's really quite a surprise and a shock to the majority of these candidates that they have to go through this.

Alsobrook: It's a pretty rigorous screening process that I don't think they realize when they get involved in it. Do you think that made some of them to dropout? Just...

Adams: Oh yes. We've had a few drop out because they just didn't want to have their [inaudible] reviewed.

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Alsobrook: Roberta, have you had past jobs that you feel helped prepare you for this one?

Adams: Yes, in an indirect way. I was a traffic manager for an advertising agency, which meant that I coordinated the entire workflow for that agency. It was a multimillion dollar operation. So I had to coordinate the schedules, keep everybody in line on their schedules, and you're talking about Ron Harper Copywriters out of...

Alsobrook: Uh-huh.

Adams: So, not only did I have to have a tremendous feel for detail and timing, but I also had to be able to get along with all of these [inaudible] personalities. Which is exactly what I am doing now, but instead of mechanicals and direct mail programs, it's commissions, and people, and people's feelings, and to press and congressional members. So I thought that had a tremendous – gave me a tremendous advantage. And then I also had used both systems there in the advertising agency, which designed the systems for this office, which not everybody uses. So now they are – we are trying to incorporate those on computers – we should be computerizing these.

Alsobrook: When this administration first came in, didn't after they were inundated by paperwork—the personnel, didn't they try to bring in more computers [inaudible]?

Adams: Yeah, they had—don't disregard them—they had a good computer system, but it wasn't as extensive as they wanted it. Now they're trying to restructure it to computerize just about everything, which is going to be a tremendous job. We get I don't know how many thousands of letters for one counselor, and thousands of letters for one Cabinet position. Essentially, they are asking for the same thing. They are either asking for a job, or they are recommending somebody for the job. And with the same types of letters, it's easy to computerize their responses. We are running statistics on them and that's what the computers are really doing. So it's a [inaudible] considerably now that they are on computers.

Alsobrook: Now, have you used Matrix to maintain control over the various projects that you are working on, so as to know exactly where they are, and who's said what, and...

Adams: No, [inaudible] as far as the advisory, the advisory boards are concerned. They designed primarily for the full-time jobs. They are trying to restructure that to give us a good ticker system for vacancies on the advisory board. It's usually appointments by board versus alphabetical, either by department or by appointee. It's just a way to destructure for full-time. There's not that many people. But when you're working in volume—we're probably working on five or six boards at a time actively. And another five or six coming up, within a week or so, constantly evolving, and we're talking about hundreds of people at one time. [Inaudible] the printouts would be by vacancy, by board, by seats. See there's hundreds of boards, and hundreds of seats.

Alsobrook: Okay. How about your future plans? Can you tell me about that – your immediate future?

Adams: My immediate future – I'm trying, at this time, to transfer to the Department of Energy and Government Relations. To me, it will be a tremendous challenge, since the [inaudible] is a present and future issue, and I think it would be a good career. I think the experience in Washington I think could be helpful to... 'cause this is for the Philadelphia region – I could be helpful to that region working with Washington. It just depends on if I can get this worked out. That's what I am trying to do now.

Alsobrook: Where might you be say five years from now, or maybe even ten years from now?

Adams: I haven't got an idea. I never thought I would be doing this here [inaudible]. [Both laugh] If I work it out with this energy position, I hope I'd be there five years from now, but I never knew five years ago – I haven't had a specific goal or career path. I'd like to [inaudible] with the program forever and have a [inaudible] reception and clerical background.

Alsobrook: Are there certain things about the governmental system or the process since you have been here that you...

Adams: Yeah. It's a very large network system. Everybody works as a network, you know, and [inaudible]. It's interesting, it really is. It's different than corporate life. In a departmental basis, you work in one little pocket of a marketing group. A marketer reports to her chairman, or something and everybody [inaudible] marketing for one goal [inaudible] one corporation one enterprise. When you are working in the White House, I can't say for all government because this is my only experience with government, just having to work with every aspect of a network. Now the issues are the political. All the people within the White House— everything that we do satisfies every aspect, so we can make a move. The departments have to be involved—they shouldn't, but they have an opinion every aspect, or ignore every aspect, which could be detrimental to us.

Alsobrook: [inaudible] for a job like this? There is really no way to prepare for a job in the White House, is there?

Adams: No, not really. I used to go...[inaudible] people not returning calls. I see that, and I laugh at it, but it's in a cynical way, because it's so typical of Washington, but I can also understand why. If it's anything like our office, getting 800 calls a day here, or whatever it is... If you spent your whole life returning calls, you wouldn't be getting any work done. [Inaudible] There is little time to be creative, versus [inaudible], but it's a funny town.

Alsobrook: Finally, Roberta, would you give me a permanent address and telephone number- or the most permanent one that you can give me?

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Adams: Yeah. It's 1113 Clubhouse Road, Gidwyn, G-I-D-W-Y-N, Pennsylvania, 11835. My phone is 215-525-7452.

Alsobrook: Ok, is there an alumni association that would always know your present address for like 10 or 15 years from now?

Adams: Probably Peggy would. Peggy...

Alsobrook: Peggy Rainwater?

Adams: Yes.

Alsobrook: If somebody from the library might want to interview you, you know, maybe follow up on this interview and get a more in depth interview of your work in the White House ...

Adams: Oh yeah I've had 10 or 15 years to reflect. [Laughs]

Alsobrook: Yeah that's the idea.

Adams: 'Cause a lot of it you forget, a lot of the details. One thing about this job is you develop a tremendous patience – pressure patience, whatever you are able to tolerate. Another job, it's usually a lot harder in this job.

Alsobrook: Why is that? I don't quite follow...

Adams: Well, it's such a huge volume. 'Cause it's only three or four of us doing 200 advisory boards for the whole nation. [Inaudible] a lot more. We deal with a really high pressure point. We really work up there. So [inaudible] is entirely different. It's going to be funny moving to a region, and out of the sea of power.

Alsobrook: It may take you a while to adjust to a depressurized environment where ...

Adams: It may take me a little bit to adjust. I have lived it before so it's not completely strange, but it is different coming back after having been in an environment like this.

Alsobrook: Is this the same one as Philadelphia?

Adams: Yeah.

Alsobrook: Well, thank you very much for taking time – for talking with me. I know you're busy...

Adams: Thank you.

Alsobrook: ...and I appreciate it.

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Adams: [Laughs] It's been interesting.

Alsobrook: It's been interesting for me too. Thank you.